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Reagan's SALT Measure

When Ronald Reagan asked Francois Mitterrand to instruct Mikhail Gorbachev that verification of SALT is the U.S. litmus test for a new arms agreement, he set a higher standard that anti-SALT senators will soon contend makes agreement nearly impossible.

The American president was talking about not merely compliance, but verification. The French president, who got the word during his New York City visit, faithfully carried it to the Soviet ruler in Moscow. There, Mitterrand got no hints of any change in Soviet practices that have repeatedly been labeled by President Reagan as violations of both SALT I and SALT II. In fact, the Soviets will not permit verification and the United States cannot verify, partly because of the recent space debacles.

Whether or not the president fully realizes that he has driven arms control into this cul de sac, it will be pointed out to him on the Senate floor. There an amendment will be introduced to the defense bill, supporting Reagan's emphasis on verification as a condition of any new U.S.-Soviet agreement.

That could lead, by Reagan's own conditions, to the United States' exceeding SALT II ceilings later this year because the Soviets continue to make U.S. verification of their compliance impossible. In that event, both the 1986 summit and a new arms deal look like dead letters.

Congressional resolutions cannot bind the president's freedom of action. Rather, the Senate strategy is psychological: to demonstrate to pro-SALT administration officials, and to U.S. allies who are pressing for arms control concessions, that Reagan's demand for full verification of Soviet compliance with its nuclear weapons agreements has not and will not be satisfied in Moscow.

Soviet obstinacy is matched by U.S. technological decline. There have been recent disturbing setbacks in American inspection capabilities, starting with satellite-launching problems. These setbacks are being exploited by anti-SALT senators in an effort to thwart new arms agreements that would cause eventual abandonment of Reagan's cherished Strategic Defense Initiative.

The satellite-launch crisis is worse than even some administration officials realize. While the agony of Challenger's disintegration convulsed the nation, largely unnoticed lesser failures have damaged this country's ability to conduct "broad search" by reconnaissance satellites.

In a letter last week to Kenneth Adelman, director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, Sen. Jesse Helms and other SALT foes asked this question: "To what extent has the U.S. loss of the Space Shuttle and several other launch vehicles and payloads ... created a crisis in U.S. capability for SALT monitoring ... and verification?"

Behind this understated warning is harsh reality. Knowledgeable administration officials admit this difficulty more candidly. They say privately that it took three or more years of "broad search" over Siberia before the illegal Krasnoyarsk radar was accidentally discovered by satellite photography. The Krasnoyarsk complex covers the area of several football fields, and contains one building that is 27 stories high. "We have less satellite capability today than we had in July 1983" (when Krasnoyarsk was first photographed), one official told us.

Mobile missiles are seldom stockpiled anywhere near fixed silos of intercontinental missiles. Thus, they can be found only through random search by the dwindling number of U.S. spy satellites.

There is reason to believe that the Soviets are developing ways to "blind" spy satellites for brief periods, using new jamming technology. If so, verifying would become little more than hit-or-miss. The Kremlin never has and never will consider unlimited on-site inspection, by far the most reliable verification tool.

U.S. officials say privately that the Soviets are completing the construction of sheds up to 1,500 feet long to conceal nuclear weapons coming off assembly lines and at missile-deployment complexes. That eliminates a previous source of accurate information: loading docks visible to the skies.

As Reagan demands verification, his negotiating partners in Moscow tighten their measures to make it impossible and the United States loses its ability to penetrate Soviet countermeasures. That is the message anti-SALT senators want to send the country and its allies abroad. They are hoping that the president, who established the conditions and made them clear when he asked his French colleague to deliver the message, will not forget them.

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